

Vet School

Part Two



Chris Shivelton Queen MRCVS

"Vet School is full of invaluable information and advice, making it an essential read for anyone interested in a veterinary career - thoroughly recommended."

Joe Inglis BVSc MRCVS

Vet School Success

VET SCHOOL PRAISE FOR VET SCHOOL

Here are just a couple of the reviews Vet School has received. Its always great to hear your thoughts so feel free to get in touch, even if its just to say hi.

"I think vet school was great. It was full of helpful advice and information that would otherwise take a lot of Googling to find out. The case studies from other vets and vet students were really helpful. I didn't get amazing GCSE results but the book made me realise all was not lost and gave me great advice with my personal statement and work experience and I genuinely believe I owe my offer to some of the advice from the vet school book. In short I think it's God's gift to vet applicants".

Sophie Gates (student)

"Vet School has helped me in every aspect of my application: it showed me what to look for in work experience placements, what to include in my personal statement, what to expect at interviews and loads more. It's a must have for any potential vet!"

Georgie Holiday (student & Vet News Editor)

VET SCHOOL

AUTHOR

Christopher Shivelton Queen BSc BVSc MRCVS

Chris has been writing and offering advice and guidance on all aspects of vet careers and vet school applications since he was a vet student himself. He graduated in July 2007 from Bristol University, having also intercalated to achieve an additional degree in Biochemistry. Chris has been in small animal practice since graduation, initially in Oxford and then, most recently, working in the Berkshire,



Hampshire and Surrey area. Chris has been presenting to prospective future vets for many years and wrote the first edition of Vet School back in 2009, establishing his own publishing company in the process and going on to publish books by professionals in other fields. In 2012, he struck out on his own, setting up Shivelton Limited, and established Vet School Success. In addition to his advisory work on veterinary careers, Chris is a technology enthusiast and has developed iPhone apps and writes on technology

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in the veterinary sector, both through his blog (www.thenerdyvet.com) and for the veterinary press.

Chris currently lives in Dubai, UAE, and when he isn't treating the city's small animals or working on his next book or article, can be found out training for triathlons, indulging in various watersports or leaping from various planes and helicopters in the name of fun (with a parachute on, mind!).

Having successfully advised scores of students over the years, many of whom return to contribute themselves, Chris is proud of the fact that Vet School has helped so many students fulfil their ultimate dream of becoming a vet.

"I would like to thank each and every one of the fantastic contributors who have given their time and benefit of their experiences and knowledge to make this book the enjoyable yet useful tool that is. Special thanks go to Caroline for her, as ever, exquisite illustrations. This is the fifth book that I have personally had the pleasure of working with Caroline on and seeing her graphics for the first time remains one of my favorite parts of the whole process of creating a book. Lizzie Lockett also deserves a special thank you and, again, has been a long-term collaborator and contributor to my writing. Luke Gamble, the legend that is, has been hugely supportive of my writing and in spite of being a Global Superstar has also been ready to drop what he's doing to help me out. Kimberley Marsh, who has kindly allowed her personal statement to be reprinted, and the plethora of students, vets and professionals who have contributed to this book all deserve mention. I am proud to consider every one of these fine people as friends in addition to colleagues. Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for their enduring love and support during the writing of Vet School. Thank you all!"

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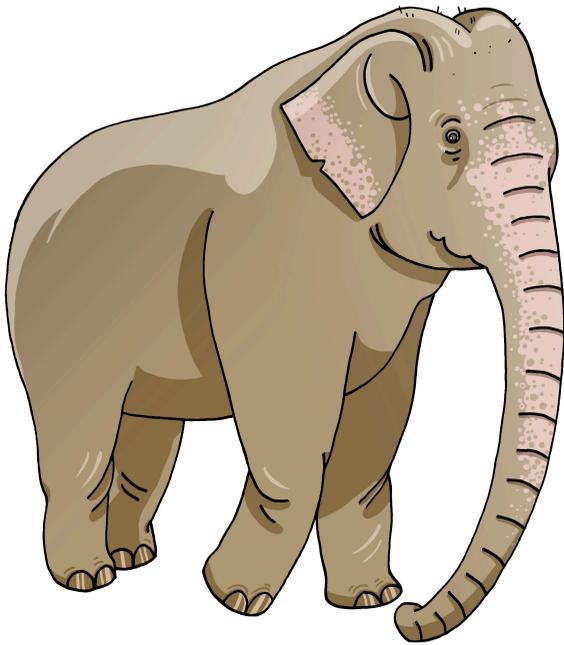
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VET SCHOOL 1: INTERVIEWS

Okay, so your applications have been submitted on time and you've been anxiously waiting to hear from the vet schools, a wait that feels like an eternity. Why do the vet schools even bother to interview applicants when a lot of other courses simply allocate places based on UCAS applications and test results? The main reason is that training a vet is a long and costly process, with the vet schools, and profession, very anxious to ensure that the considerable investment that is made in such training is directed to the best candidates and that their students are going to a) finish the course and qualify as a veterinarian, and b) represent a suitable fit for the unique culture of the vet school itself. Although every vet school achieves the same in terms of training new vets, they each have their own styles of teaching and unique culture which makes attending each one a distinct experience, in much the same way that different companies have their own 'culture.' The vet schools will be asking themselves whether you, as an individual, are likely to enjoy their school's vet school experience and ultimately benefit from the training. I am sure that you would agree that spending many thousands of pounds on someone without a face-to-face meeting seems like quite a risky move so it seems only right that the vet schools take as much care as possible in choosing their new intake.

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If you are fortunate enough to receive an invitation to interview then the first thing to do is massively congratulate yourself as it is a huge achievement in itself. Admissions tutors receive applications, read them and then make a decision as to whether your application is of sufficient interest to take it further, moving you closer to the coveted prize of a place, or to say no, in which case you'll receive a rejection. As such, an interview invite is a sign that they are very interested in you and that they can see sufficient potential in you as a future vet to spend the time and effort getting to know you better. Loads of applicants fail to make it past the initial application stage so an interview invitation is definitely a cause for celebration.

What are the benefits of interviews?

The main benefits are the following:

1. Expand on your statement. I would argue that it is almost impossible to convey all of your awesomeness in a simple UCAS application and so a great way to learn more about you, including how you communicate and think, is to meet with you face to face and have a chat. Having said this, most vet school interviews are, on average, about twenty minutes long so even that can feel like insufficient time to really let your true worth shine through. All the more reason to be well prepared and feeling confident before you head in.
2. The vet schools can verify that you actually wrote your own statement. This might sound incredibly cynical but the fact is

that veterinary is an incredibly competitive course and some students may be tempted to significantly improve the chances of their statement catching the eye of the admissions tutor reviewing it by enlisting the help of someone with superior statement writing skills. This may well do the trick and yield an interview but if it is clear that the person sat in front of them (ie you) and the person coming through in the statement in front of them do not sound like one another, then they may well conclude that you either plagiarised what you have written, which is a very serious offence, or that you had more than a fair amount of assistance in preparing it, neither of which are going to impress the panel. By meeting with you face to face, without anyone else present to help you with what to say, they can be sure that they're meeting the real you, and not a carefully crafted version of you on paper.

3. Simply get to know you better. The interview panel will be able to assess many factors from the moment they first meet you to when the interview is over and you leave. Everything from how you present yourself, to body language, tone and what you actually say, will help the vet school assess whether you are the sort of vet student that they want studying at their university and whether you'll be a potential asset to the profession. You simply cannot make such an assessment of someone on paper alone.
4. Enable you to ask questions. Any interview is a two-way process, with you having the opportunity to ask questions and learn more about the school and the vet course, thus satisfying

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yourself that should you be offered a place it is actually somewhere that you would really like to study. One important thing to remember; however, when considering what to ask at interview is to ensure that you do not ask anything for which the answer is easily found in any of the widely available media, such as their prospectus or website. This would suggest, fairly or otherwise, that you haven't taken the time to learn about the vet school and the interview panel's reaction may well be to question your preparation and commitment to study at their vet school. Remember; you don't want to give them any reason not to want to offer you a place.

When do interviews take place?

With applications submitted to UK vet schools by the UCAS deadline of 15th October, there is a period of time during which the universities review them and draw up interview shortlists. The interviews themselves tend to start in November and continue through to March or even April in some cases, although the majority of candidates are interviewed during January and February. One of the key take-home messages is therefore that no news is good news, as if you haven't had a rejection from the schools you applied to then there is a very good chance that your name is on an interview list and your invite will follow.

What form do the interviews take?

The majority of the vet schools use the traditional system of inviting you for a twenty minute interview with between two and three people (the panel), drawn from the veterinary teaching and clinical staff, veterinary professionals, and wider university faculty members. You will be directed to an area outside the interview room, where you may well find yourself waiting anxiously with several other nervous candidates. My advice would be to try and avoid getting drawn into conversation with others at this last minute stage, as it is very easy to get all flustered and spooked before your own interview, especially if you end up talking with the one person who seems to have done all the right work experience, has all the right grades, and still had time to write an opera, direct a play, perform at the Albert Hall, and generally excel in life way more than you seem to have done. Every interview waiting area seems to have *that person* and so I recommend just focusing on quietly preparing yourself, even if that simply involves sitting there breathing calmly and visualising a great interview. Taking along a few of your work-experience references and reading those whilst waiting can be a great way to focus your mind, trigger memories and generally give your ego and confidence a bit of a boost, assuming of course that they're good references!

Once you get called in, you'll usually be directed to sit in front of a table, behind which the interview panel will sit whilst they speak with you. It is remarkable just how swiftly those twenty minutes can go by and before you know it you'll be shaking

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hands, thanking the panel for their time and sighing with relief as you exit the room. After that it's simply a case of fingers crossed and wait for the university's decision.

There's always one. Or three.

A few of the vet schools do things a little differently when it comes to interviewing candidates, and it's certainly worth knowing more about their methods if you're planning on applying to any of them.

The first is Cambridge, who tend to start interviewing candidates much earlier than the other universities and so this may well be your first. When you apply to Cambridge you don't apply simply to the vet school. Instead, you will apply to a college that accepts vet students, either directly or through an open application, by which your application is directed to a college not of your specific choosing. As colleges are kind of like mini universities within a wider Cambridge University, with much of your learning being facilitated directly through the college itself via tutorials and other such activities, you will probably find that you have at least two interviews. One will be with a member of the college staff and tends to be more focused on testing your general intellect, attitudes, personality and ability to think through problems, with the purpose of assessing whether you're likely to fit in well, thrive and also contribute to college life. My own college interview was, as I recall it, quite a surreal experience

with the conversation at one point straying onto the question of whether Woolly Mammoths should be brought back to life. The second interview is likely to then be with a subject-specific tutor, most probably a member of the vet school clinical and teaching team who is linked to the college. This will focus much more on your application to study veterinary and may involve a discussion of your work experience, your ability to apply knowledge from your studies to a range of problems or scenarios, and will generally probe your interest in, aptitude for and likely ability to do well on the vet course. My interview involved me being asked to select an anatomical specimen before going into the room and I was then asked various questions relating to that item. In my case, I selected a model of a dog's hip and so ended up discussing hip dysplasia and arthritis. As with the other vet schools, the actual interviews themselves were about twenty minutes long and the time passed very swiftly.

Liverpool have adopted a system of 'mini-interviews', which they call Multi Mini Interviews. This system sees candidates cycle round a series of interview tables, with about nine small, five minute interviews being conducted in total. Each station has a specific focus, such as knowledge of the profession, ethics, your motivations for wanting to study veterinary, and your ability to think critically by considering a scientific paper. The interviewers have a standard set of questions and scoring system, with the argument being that this represents a much fairer way of interviewing and assessing candidates than that offered by a traditional twenty minute interview. As a candidate you can

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expect to be marked on such factors as your communication skills, awareness of relevant ethical issues, and whether the interviewer considered you to be a suitable candidate for the profession. Some liken this style of interviewing to speed dating and complain that there is insufficient time at each station to really develop a good level of conversation and communicate all that you might want to. Others really rate this method and welcome the variety and perceived fairness that it offers.

Nottingham, the newest of the UK vet schools, has a more developed and staged interview system, with similarities to the corporate assessment days that you might be invited to if you were applying for a graduate entry position in, say, banking or the like. There are three stages to the day for those invited to a Nottingham interview:

1. **Interview.** The first is a standard panel-based interview, about twenty minutes in length, and provides an opportunity to speak one-on-one with the interviewers about your application, work experience, and, well, just about anything really.

2. **Practical Aptitude.** This assesses your ability to apply your knowledge of biology, science, and other subjects to various scenarios, and may involve handling animal material and considering clinical information. It is not a test of how much veterinary knowledge you already have, but more a way of seeing how you think and whether you are able to take information, process it and apply your own existing knowledge

such that you are able to make reasoned and educated assessments. There is usually a series of stations, including rest stations, which you move around in order and have a set period of time at each during which to answer the question posed.

3. Team Working Assessment. A core feature of Nottingham's teaching style involves group work with other vet students and so it is important for the school to select students who show a good level of ability and aptitude for working effectively in teams. This doesn't necessarily mean that they choose the same type of person, as a team in which every member was a dominant, leader type would be as ineffective as one in which every member was a genius but couldn't explain their ideas to their teammates or make decisions. As such, a good team involves individuals with a complimentary set of skills and character traits working as one for a common goal. The interviewers will therefore be looking at how you interact with others in such a teamwork situation. The key with this is not to try and be someone you're clearly not. So, for example, if you're normally quite a shy person but have lots of good ideas don't think you have to go into this exercise pretending to be an alpha character and bossing others around. The mismatch will shine through and be obvious. Better to relax, be yourself, try your hardest and adapt to the team you're put with.

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NOTE: At the time of writing this book it appears that the RVC in London are also starting to introduce a bit more of a practical element to their interviews. For example, you may well be shown a couple of anatomical specimens, such as a dog skull next to a horse skull, and be asked to comment on them. Whilst they may not expect you to know the detailed anatomical features of and differences between the two, they will be looking at your thought process and for evidence that you can think logically and apply sound principles to your arguments. So, in the case of the skulls, you could point to the fact that the horse can only open its jaw a little way, which is an adaptation as a grazing herbivore who is suited to nibbling at grass compared to the dog, who has a relatively wide angle of articulation, enabling the animal to seize onto prey. A look at their respective eye sockets would also highlight the differences in adaptation, with the horse having eyes on the side of the head, enabling it to effectively scan the horizon for any sign of potential threat from predators, whereas the dog has forward-facing eyes, which enable it to better judge distances and thus stalk and catch prey. The key point is not that you get the answers correct, but that you a) don't panic and freeze, and b) calmly walk the interview panel through your thought process, which they will be assessing as being one compatible with a potential vet student.

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that you know exactly where, as in which room, your interview is going to be and at what time it is. Aim to arrive 10-15 minutes before the actual interview is due to start and sit calmly and quietly outside until called in. If you are able to find out who will be taking your interview early on in the day and can call upon any current vet students you know to give some background information on the members of the panel that they know then by all means do it but don't get bogged down by this and don't do it if it's just likely to stress you out and distract you from focusing on answering the questions that are actually asked. There are a plethora of 'advanced' interview techniques including skills such as mirroring which are beyond the scope of this book and there is a danger that you can become distracted from the important aspects of the interview by focusing time and effort on trying to 'engineer' and steer the interview too much. With practice you'll end up getting good at doing all of these things anyway so don't dwell on them at this point.

Interview Questions

There are several different types of question that you might be asked at interview and although it is impossible to predict exactly what will be asked, you can certainly ensure that you are generally prepared so you know not to panic if you are asked a particularly testing question on veterinary ethics, for example.

There are several broad categories into which you can divide most interview questions:

1. Questions that you must prepare an answer for:

These questions are so likely to come up that failing to consider them beforehand would be foolish. They are nice questions – assuming you are prepared for them – as they allow you to settle in to the interview. For example, being able to explain clearly and confidently why you want to study veterinary, and especially at that particular university, will enable you to tackle tougher questions with more confidence when they are asked later in the interview, as you will be in your stride.

2. Questions you will be expected to know quite a bit about from either your A-level (or equivalent) syllabus or from work experience.

This type of question is hard to prepare for specifically and you will need to rely on the academic ability and hard work you have done to date in your studies to help you. Similarly, you should have done a decent amount of varied work experience by the time you are called for interview so try and relax and remember that if you've done the basic preparation beforehand then you'll be fine. This type of question is often expanded to move into the next type of question.

3. Questions that take you out of your comfort zone.

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You will inevitably get this type of question at interview and they tend to be the ones that students complain about afterwards! Being asked a tough question, or one without an immediately obvious answer, is actually a really good sign as it means that the panel want to stretch you and really see how your mind works. This means that they're seriously considering you for a place and want to make sure you have the aptitude and attitude for the course. The aim of these questions is for you to extrapolate your current knowledge, either from your academic work or work experience, and apply it appropriately to the question at hand. The important thing to remember when faced with a question to which no obvious answer exists is to avoid getting flustered and either blurting out the first thing you think of or just sitting there like a rabbit stuck in headlights. There is no such thing as an impossible interview question but it is vital that you take a moment to think it over before answering. It often helps to talk through your thought processes as this will enable the interview panel to see how your mind works and they may even subtly prompt and guide you to help keep you on track.

4. Questions that can trip you up.

There are certain questions that offer you the potential to really stick your foot in it if you just blurt out the first thing that pops into your head. We will see some examples of this sort of question later in the chapter.

5. Questions which open up a debate.

These questions have no correct answer and you need to be able to show an appreciation of both sides of an argument and discuss them rationally, before offering your own balanced opinion. Questions on ethics often fall into this broad category.

It is the latter type of questions which tend to really help differentiate you from the other candidates and make the interviewers remember you at the end of a long day speaking with multiple students, all of whom will be broadly similar. The course is a lengthy one and they will likely be teaching you for a large proportion of it. As such they will want to admit students who can think for themselves, approach topics rationally and engage in interesting and lively debates rather than just being fact-regurgitation machines. If you are able to be this type of student then you will make their lives far more interesting and increase your chances of being offered a place.

Example Questions

There are about a billion and one questions that you could be asked by the interviewers, and some vet schools seem to have their own unique style and preferences for their interviews. What follows are some examples of questions students have

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been asked in the past and which may come up in one form or another in your interview. They can easily form the basis for many similar questions of your own design.

Introductory & Motivational Questions:

1. *How was your journey here today?*

This is a friendly, low pressure, question intended to ease you into the interview and help you relax in what will feel a very formal setting. Take the opportunity to engage in a bit of light banter before the interview is directed in a more formal direction.

2. *Have you been to the university before?*

If you attended one of the open days then say so and take the opportunity to elaborate, for example, by telling them which part of the open day you found most interesting. It is also a great opportunity to tell them if you have been to the vet school or university before in a non-official capacity, for example, to visit a friend who is studying there. This will demonstrate your determination, resolve and resourcefulness in finding out as much as you can about all aspects of the course and specific school. Needless to say, however, if your only visit to the vet

school involved a midnight ninja-style climb over the wall then probably best not to mention this!

3. *What do you think of our prospectus/ website?*

You will have read this. Please tell me you've read this! If not then this constitutes a major own goal and you will have to be very good not to let the interviewers see this is the case. If you have then offer an honest opinion and tell them about the parts you liked. What did it tell you that was unique about this particular vet school? This could lead on to other topics of conversation, such as work experience.

4. *How do you think you're doing with your exams?*

This is a great chance to really sell yourself, so if you're doing well then say so and highlight that you are working hard. If you're not doing so well then unless it's glaringly obvious in your personal statement, referee report or general application then it's probably better to just gloss over this and reassure them that you are doing well – you don't, after all, want to offer them any excuse not to offer you a place. If it's possible try and steer the conversation onto a subject that you are particularly interested in and that has some veterinary focus.

5. *Why do you want to be a vet?*

This is probably the most commonly asked question of any prospective vet, and even qualified veterinary surgeons are asked this countless times during their lives. It is also one of the most tricky to answer well and so I strongly recommend you spend a decent amount of time sitting and pondering this. You must ensure that you have an interesting, succinct and convincing answer to this question whilst trying to avoid sounding like everybody else – not an easy task! Try to avoid the usual clichéd responses, such as “I love animals.” A simple fondness for animals and fascination for science do not necessarily make you a suitable candidate for training as a vet. There is often an initial motivation that makes candidates think of wanting to become a vet. This may have been an early experience with a family pet at the vets, or inspiration found in books about veterinary, such as the classic James Herriot series, or TV programmes such as ‘Super Vets,’ which manage to capture peoples’ imagination. Its hardly surprising that such influences encourage students into considering veterinary as a good career option. It is, however, what you did after this initial trigger that really tells the vet schools whether you have thought seriously about your career choice. There is no way of knowing what you are getting yourself into without doing at least a basic amount of work-experience. As you will have seen from the chapter on work-experience, the key is to gain as broad a level of experience as possible. This way you will stand a greater chance of seeing first-hand all the facets

of being a vet in this modern age. It is not all fun and it is important that you are aware and able to acknowledge and discuss the negatives of the career as well as enjoying the numerous positives that come with being a member of this special profession. I personally know of people who managed to secure a place at vet school with little to no real work-experience and who subsequently discovered that it really wasn't what they were expecting and that the profession was not really something that they were going to enjoy being part of. It's a real shame to get to the stage where you've committed yourself to starting university before making this realization and having to change direction. That's assuming, of course, that you're jammy enough to get offered a place without having demonstrated a decent amount of experience in the first place!

Veterinary is a tough course and the admissions team need to be absolutely certain that the people they offer places to are going to stick it out and complete their training. This not only means ensuring that you have the academic ability to cope with the course – hence questions about how you're doing in your exams and science-based questions – but also that you have the focus, motivation and determination to really get your teeth into the course. There are numerous times during the five or six years of vet school where most of us have thought, "screw this! I want to do ANYTHING else!" We all have these moments. The key difference, however, is to select students who are then able to cope with the pressures, knuckle down and remember why it is they want to graduate as a vet in the first place. Being

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informed in the first place is a huge part of ensuring this focus remains.

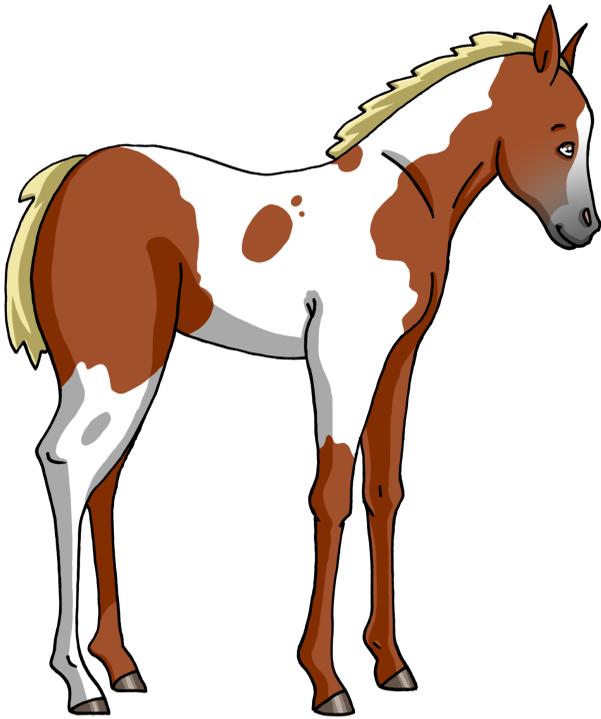
Veterinary is not all about working in clinical practice either. Research, industry and teaching are all vital aspects of the profession and vets are as important in these areas as they are in treating and dealing with patients and their owners. Experience of or, if this is not possible, informed appreciation of these other career options is something else that it is important to communicate to selectors. You may not have any intention at present of entering veterinary research but, as we all know, things can change and it is important to be open minded – you will, after all, be trained in all fields of veterinary – and demonstrating that you are aware and would consider these other options will impress and reassure the admissions tutors that you are a serious candidate and not someone who can do well in exams and just figured veterinary might be fun.

6. *Why do you want to study at this university?*

This question is a test of both your knowledge of the university, especially the aspects that make it unique and different to the other vet schools, and also one of your motivation. These days you need to whittle down your choices of vet school before sending the UCAS form off so chances are that you did a pretty decent amount of research into each of the schools before making your choices. What were the deciding factors that made

some schools stand out over others? It could be that there were specific, unique features of one vet school that made you prefer it over another and these are the kind of factors that will help answer this question. It could be that you have a particular interest in equine medicine and your research and discussions with current vets told you that one vet school had an especially skilled and renowned equine department or specific clinician. Maybe you are particularly familiar with the university and the vet school, having perhaps visited friends, and so know that you will enjoy your time studying there yourself. Any reason, if explained with enthusiasm, is potentially a good one and this is a good thing to role-play during your mock interviews.

I have consulted admissions tutors and students alike to collate a number of questions that have been asked, in some form or another, in previous year's interviews. Although intended to be a helpful feature please don't blame me if you don't get asked any of these questions – there are about a million different questions that interviewers could choose to ask candidates and one thing I am not is psychic. In fact, feel free to get in touch via Twitter (@thenerdyvet), Facebook (Vet School Success) or the website (www.vetschoolsuccess.com) and let me know what they did actually ask you – we can then help future years together. Having said all this, perhaps the interviewers will read this book too and get some ideas!



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2: LIFE AT VET SCHOOL

All things being well you have received an offer, achieved the required grades and are now due to start university as a brand new vet student - pretty exciting, huh?! This is basically where the adventure really begins, as you make the transition from school pupil (unless you're reading this as a graduate, in which case you know what it is you're in for) to uni student. Chances are that you will already have some ideas about what life at university involves, some accurate and realistic, others based on far-fetched hearsay and popular media, such as films or TV shows. You may well know people at university already and so will have had a chance to speak with them about their experiences. If you haven't then its a great idea to find someone to have a chat with about being a student.

Although being a vet student is, in many ways a typical student experience, it is also different in many unique ways, in large part due to both the length of the course and the fact that the workload is so much greater than most other degrees. We will explore some of these unique aspects of vetdom in due course.

At this stage there will be lots of actions on your vet school "to do before starting uni list," including sorting out accommodation and finalising the matter of finances. Then, of course, there is the

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small matter of turning your mind towards the life-changing process of actually leaving home. For many of you this will be the first time you have spent any significant amount of time living away from home - a daunting but exhilarating prospect. Some of you may even be able to put such thoughts to the back of your mind for the time being as you contemplate plans for a Gap Year. If so then you might want to pop a bookmark in this page and come back in a few month's time. Those of you counting down the days until the 'big move,' read on....

What do I need to sort out before starting university?

The main things to sort out before actually, physically arriving to start vet school, are:

1. Accommodation - where are you going to live?

Most first years will have applied to and been offered a room in a student hall, or separate house owned by the university. There are several options and not every one of these is going to suit every student. The main types of first-year accommodation are:

Catered halls - these are usually large buildings with lots of rooms, normally arranged into corridors or blocks, with either en-suite bathroom facilities or shared bathrooms between several rooms. This arrangement lends itself to the mad dash for the shower in the mornings and 'learning to tolerate others' that is oh so character building. The rooms may well be single

occupancy but could just as well involve you having to share with another person, a la US college style.

The key difference compared to other types of hall is the fact that food is provided, with breakfast, possibly lunch, and dinner all prepared by professional caterers and ready for you to tuck into without ever having to reach for a pan. This obviously has massive benefits, especially as eating together in a large hall with all of your mates is a great social experience and a great way of getting to meet as many different people as possible. It also means that you, technically, have more time to devote to both academic and extra-curricular pursuits, whether it be getting involved in societies, sports and other such endeavors. Most halls do provide very rudimentary self-catering facilities, usually in a small room on each floor, complete with a microwave, but these are only really intended for preparing the occasional simple snack as opposed to three course meals. As such, if you are a budding Michelin starred chef then catered halls may not be for you.

One thing to note about catered halls is the fact that although the mealtimes do run for a reasonable period of time, thus allowing as many students to attend as possible, there will be times when, as a vet student, you won't be able to make it back or have to leave halls earlier than normal. Although most halls will, with fair warning, try and make allowances for you, the lack of flexibility is something that may become irksome. The quality of the food can also vary considerably between halls, so it is worth trying to chat with students who have been in any catered halls you are considering before you apply in order to

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get the lowdown on the food. In terms of cost, however, catered halls do prove to be a great deal, assuming you eat there often enough, with many offering heavily subsidised food and ensuring that you get at least one, decent square meal per day, which is not something that is guaranteed in self-catering.

Self-catering halls - as with catered halls, these are often large buildings divided into corridors with shared kitchens, or possibly self-contained flats with several people sharing. I spent my first year in a shared house, which was part of a larger student hall, and we had shared bathrooms and a kitchen, much like living at home except with the need to cook for ourselves and a greater number of indoor water-fights and corridor cricket games! The main advantage of cooking for yourself is that you retain control over what you eat, when you eat and how much you spend. This option does require discipline, especially to avoid falling into the classic student rut of eating nothing but toast, pasta and beans, and I certainly know friends who spent their entire first year surviving on pizza, even using the box as a plate to avoid having to wash up! Half the problem is that scores of students simply do not know how to cook for themselves and don't realise how easy it is to prepare something fresh and healthy and to do so both quickly and cheaply. The benefits of getting into the habit of eating healthily and correctly from the start are clear, with major knock-on advantages for both your academic studies and your general wellbeing. My advice, if you don't know the basics of cooking and preparing food, is to get yourself a simple cookery book and start making the odd meal

at home before you're left to fend completely for yourself. Self-catering can also be a fun, sociable option, with cooking and mealtimes a great chance to chat with your flatmates and catch-up on the day's events. There is also the option of hosting dinner for your friends and, of course, impressing that new girlfriend or boyfriend with your culinary skills – much more suave than dragging them along to the cafeteria! In my house each person cooked for themselves every day, which could get a little dull and feel a bit like a chore occasionally, whereas in our second year we developed a house cooking rota, whereby one person would cook for the house each day. The advantages of this were that we had variety in our diets, could spend the time we would normally cook doing other things, and catch up with our flatmates when we all ate together. The other benefit is that it is generally easier and more cost effective to buy, prepare and cook ingredients for a bigger meal than it is to cook for one person, unless you're happy to then eat the same thing for several days.

Colleges – if you take up a place at Cambridge you will more than likely live in your college for at least the first year. As far as I am aware they are all catered, with the option of attending college formals being a great feature, and thus have all the pros and cons of other catered halls.

Private sector – the options above are provided by the university itself and so many of the services which students might take for granted, such as cleaning, are included as part of the fee paid. Some students find themselves in private sector accommodation, either through choice or because they were

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unable, for whatever reason, to secure university accommodation. As well as, typically, being more expensive than university housing, there are many other things to consider if looking at the private sector, especially for your first year at university.

The cost of renting in the private sector will, likely, be greater than that of university housing and you will probably have to sign a twelve month contract, although some landlords and agencies do offer options for shorter agreements. This is important to check as the difference between paying nine month's worth of rent and then moving out at the end of the academic year, and paying a full year, including the summer when you will probably be back at home, is considerable. There are also 'extra' costs which you may not have thought about and which you wouldn't need to really worry about in halls, such as agency fees, deposits, including deposit-security fees, the costs of cleaning at the end of the tenancy and all the myriad utility bills that you will have to manage yourselves. Some private sector landlords and agencies include the cost of household bills in the monthly rental so you don't have to manage these yourself, but the rent charged tends to be higher as a result.

One potential drawback of living outside of halls and other university accommodation is the risk of feeling socially isolated. Sure, you might hit it off straight away with your new flatmates and become 'best friends forever,' but many people don't immediately click with those that they are forced to live with and the risk of those students becoming withdrawn and choosing to

retire to their rooms each day is a serious one, especially if it is the first time they have lived away from the security and comforts of home. These students are the ones most at risk of dropping out of university, something which they will more than likely go on to regret. If you find yourself in the position of having to turn to private sector accommodation in your first year of university please make sure that you develop social connections outside of your house, whether that be with course-mates or by joining a sports team or society. The Fresher Fair, which most universities hold in one form or another during the first few weeks of the new term, is often a great place to start.

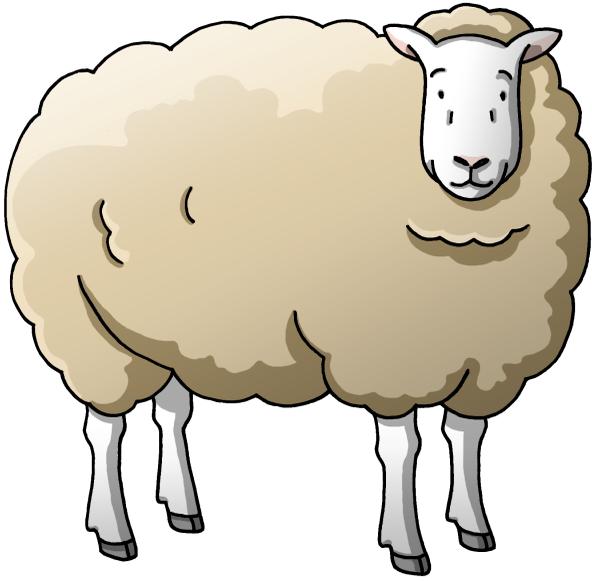
At some point during your second or possibly third term in the first year, your thoughts will turn to where and with whom you are going to live in second year. This is, understandably, quite a big deal and can result in a fair amount of stress, drama and general upheaval. The subject of who is going to live with who can, and often does, lead to personal relationships being strained for a variety of reasons, normally as a result of there being differences in opinion over who is going to make up 'the house.' I was lucky in that I had formed a pretty strong and well balanced friendship group, meaning that the six (a good number as well) of us were happy to consider living together. The next task was to choose where to live. You may find that, yet again, opinions as well as budgets differ and coupled with the pressure to find somewhere before they all get snapped up in the crazy melee that is the

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university 'housing season,' can lead to it being a daunting but also exciting time. One question that always springs to the fore around this time is "to live with vet friends or not to live with vet friends?" This is a personal decision with definite pros and cons to both answers. I, personally, lived with other vets, meaning our dinnertime conversations naturally drifted towards disgusting vet humour such as the fact that our tagliatelli resembled the tapeworms we'd just been studying, whereas many others I know chose to live with hall friends or other non-vet people, delaying living with fellow vets until the clinical years.

Living at Home

Some of you may opt to apply to vet school locally, with the intent being to live at home during your studies. Although this is certainly an option and would be expected to lessen the expense of studying at vet school, it does have its pros and cons, as with most things. The first point to make is that you are not guaranteed to receive an offer from your 'local' vet school, in which case you may have no choice but to move away and live as a typical student. Secondly, much of the fun and experience associated with being at university and especially being a vet student, comes from being away from the home environment and taking a leap into the unknown, both domestically and



VET SCHOOL

3: FINANCES

Training to become a vet is expensive. There is simply no getting away from this fact. With the cost of going to university ever-increasing and with tuition fees, especially for highly sought-after courses such as veterinary, at the levels that they are, average debt values amongst UK veterinary graduates have been on the rise, with the current average debt on graduation being in the region of £45,000, although finding accurate figures is difficult so it may even be more than this and is, I am certain, set to rise considerably in the coming years. Factor in living expenses, which many students cover through student loans, and it is not difficult to see veterinary graduates leaving university with debts in excess of £80,000! Why does it cost so much to go to university, and especially to train as a vet? What sources of funding are available and how can you afford to go to vet school? Read on for the answers. Please note that the majority of the commentary in this chapter is targeted at UK home students, and especially those studying in England, although there is consideration for those students from Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, the EU and International students, so fear not.

Why does it cost so much to go to Vet School?

There are a number of factors that contribute to the overall high cost of studying for a veterinary degree, and these are:

Tuition fees

The average annual tuition fee for UK veterinary courses is now £9000, with international students having to pay closer to £20,000 per year. So, for a home student studying veterinary science as their first degree the cost of tuition alone over five years is £45,000! This is a marked change to what it was even when I was studying, and the cost of graduating as a vet is huge compared to many currently qualified vets' experiences. The argument for this high level of tuition is that universities need to charge higher fees to fund continued investment in research and teaching to enable them to compete in a global higher education market and attract the best minds to work and teach at them, thus raising the standard of education overall. It is difficult to argue with this but the danger is that it may soon become prohibitively expensive for those from more modest backgrounds, and whose families can't afford to provide significant financial support, to consider vet school and will not be able to consider training as vets. A narrowing in the demographic of the profession would not be a positive move and would go completely against the aim of the profession to increase diversity and access. Contrary to popular belief, vets do not earn huge salaries and so the incentive or return on initial investment may simply no longer be present for a lot of students, who would otherwise have made fantastic vets. There may also be a drive for good veterinary undergraduates to gain their degrees outside of the UK, with many schools now offering

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veterinary courses, often taught in English and at a fraction of the cost of completing the course here at home.

EMS Costs

Completing EMS (Extra-Mural Studies) placements is a requirement of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons and so a significant proportion of vet students' vacation time is spent seeing practice with a variety of different providers. Although vet students and the profession as a whole places great value on the merits of the EMS scheme, there is ongoing debate about the costs associated with it. It is estimated, by some sources, that the total cost of EMS over the entire duration of the course could be as high as 5-10% of the total average student debt, so between £2,000 and 4,500. But why?

1. **Cost of attending EMS** – Not everyone is able to access the placements they need or want from home and so many students either have to commute long distances each day or find and pay for accommodation in order to be able to attend placements. I know friends who were routinely having to drive 80 mile round trips each day to get to their foster practice, and others who had to pay for B&B or hotel rooms for the duration of their placements, which can be anything up to three weeks in length. It doesn't take a degree in maths to work out that the costs can soon rocket! There is no payment made to the student for any of these placements,

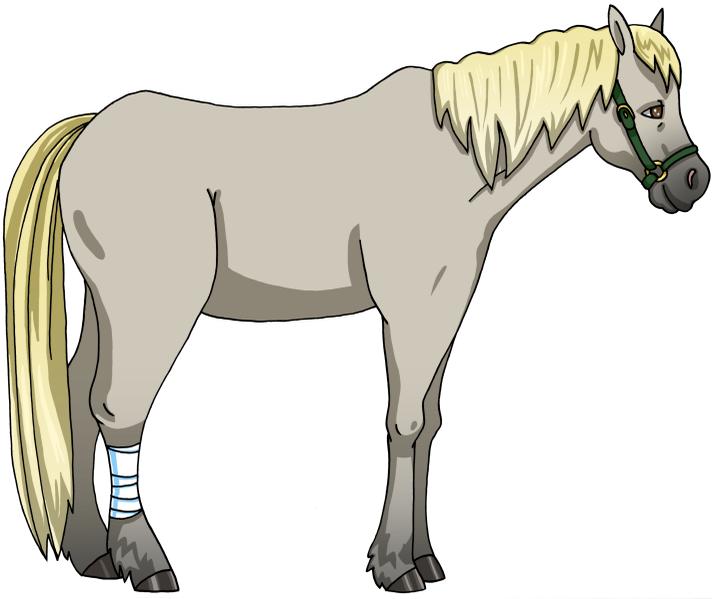
although some types, such as lambing, do sometimes offer students a small amount for their efforts. As such, veterinary students routinely find themselves considerably out of pocket in their bid to complete their EMS.

2. **Inability to work during holidays** – Due to the fact that vet students have to complete EMS during vacations, they are thus unable to seek paid employment during university holidays. This lack of earning power further compounds the debt incurred during the holidays and means that vet students routinely start the new university year in a worse financial state than their non-veterinary peers.

No Government Support

Medical and dental students can expect to receive government support in the form of NHS bursaries, which help towards funding a large part of their training. Although they are expected to 'repay' some of this support by working in the NHS after graduation, the truth is that doctors and dentists can expect to earn considerably more than their veterinary counterparts, perhaps not immediately but certainly within a few years.

It is true that veterinary medicine is, for the most part, private medicine and so there is no obligation on the government to fund the education and training of its future practitioners and beneficiaries. However, how many of you have private medical or dental cover and pay handsomely for their services? Is it fair that



VET SCHOOL

4: CAREER OPTIONS

Many of us have a picture in our mind of the traditional vet. The truth is that the classic idea of the 'Vet In Practice' is a very small part of the overall make-up of the profession, with a huge variety of different career options open to graduates and vets working in all fields and sectors of both the economy and society. Here, we explore some of the options open to graduates from the UK vet schools, and indeed veterinary on the whole.

Clinical Work

First Opinion

It is still very much the case that approximately 80% of new vets enter clinical practice, predominantly first-opinion, with this representing the classic 'GP' style of veterinary medicine in which vets advise owners on routine preventative measures, including procedures such as vaccination, neutering and dentals. They also see sick animals for the first time, using their knowledge, skills and clinical equipment and tests to diagnose and, where possible, treat cases. Although it used to be the case that most practices were mixed, meaning their vets saw both small animals and large animals, including horses and farm stock, it is becoming harder and harder to find genuinely mixed jobs these days, with a definite shift towards vets either treating large or small animals. The differentiation gets more specific still, with many large animal

vets dealing with either just horses or farm animals. The 'mixed' jobs that are available tend to be in the more remote parts of the country and more often than not, the 'mix' is anything but, with a classic complaint from new vets being that the only large animal work they get to see is either TB testing or the occasional early morning emergency farm call-out. Neither of these really do much to foster an ongoing love for large animal work and these vets often find themselves making the decision to specialise and focus on either large or small animals, with many choosing the latter.

First opinion work enables vets to consolidate and develop their skills and knowledge across all of the disciplines, from medicine to surgery, including honing their expertise in the use of diagnostics such as radiography (using xrays), ultrasonography and other such tests. Although UK veterinary graduates are trained to achieve a basic level of 'Day One' competency and are, essentially, omni-competent, the truth is that the biggest learning curve usually occurs during those first few vital months in practice, during which new vets are exposed to cases which they have to manage on their own, without the safety net of knowing that the ultimate responsibility for their patient belongs to someone else. This is an incredibly daunting period and making sure that you choose a good practice that is going to a) support you during this incredibly important transition, and b) provide the opportunity to gain exposure to a broad range of cases and work them up thoroughly and effectively, is a vital thing to get right. The worst type of first practice would be one that

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expects a new graduate to manage a clinic on their own, with no positive input or guidance from senior vets. This is a sure way to reinforce potentially bad habits, many of which the new graduate will not even realise they have. Now that we have the Professional Development Phase (PDP), there is at least a basic framework for new graduates to follow in order to achieve the first target of 'Year One' competency, although this does still rely heavily on working in a practice that buys into the principle of the scheme as well as your own individual motivation.

First opinion work exposes new graduates to the following aspects of clinical veterinary work:

- a) **Client contact** – As this book has reiterated many times, veterinary is a very people-centred profession and you will have to communicate and deal with a whole range of different people, from the plain crazy to the owners who are emotional and may, at times, be angry, confused, upset, elated, and all the emotions in between. You will learn the art of consulting and history taking, and be expected to manage client expectations, including ensuring clients are given accurate estimates and kept informed of changes to their animal's case, such as reporting results or discussing diagnoses and treatment options. The best way to get a feel for this is to watch qualified vets in action – you'll soon notice how they handle various different situations.

- b) **Time pressure** – Chances are that at vet school you will have had the chance to take your own consults, although you

probably would have been able to go over the usual 10-15 minute time limit that most veterinary consults last without too much incident. Once you're in private practice and working as a fresh-faced new vet you will be expected to be able to manage your time effectively and conduct consultations in the allotted time given. This rings equally true for routine surgeries, such as neutering, especially when you acknowledge the fact that 'time equals money' and the longer you take to do something, the less you can realistically do in any day and therefore the lower your earning potential for the practice. Now, no one is implying that all practices care about is how much money you can bring into the practice but it is important to realise early on that if the practice doesn't make money then they can't pay you, let alone consider investing in new equipment and facilities to enable them to develop. It's also important to be able to manage your time effectively from a personal welfare point of view. If you take ages with every consult, then the result will be that you end up regularly running over into lunch and your evenings, or having to start work earlier to enable you to deal with in-patients and the like. Vets work long hours at the best of times and if you end up making your days longer than they need to be then you'll end up stressed, ill and disillusioned, which would be no good to you or your practice.

- c) **Money** – This makes practices function and you are employed to generate it, whilst also ensuring you fulfil your

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veterinary oath to uphold animal welfare. As such, you will learn the importance of charging correctly for your work, estimating so that clients are informed of the likely cost of tests and treatments before they are given the bill, and dealing with such matters as insurance claims. Unfortunately, it is a fact of life that a large proportion of complaints originate from disagreements about money, either because an owner wasn't prepared for how much their animal's care costs or for other similar reasons. It is important to have an appreciation and understanding of practice economics and to know the reasons for why vets charge what they do. It is also vital that you realise and recognise your own worth. You will have trained for at least five years to be a vet so it is only fair that you are paid a reasonable salary for a professional, and that the practice asks you to generate a certain amount of revenue to justify that salary. In turn, the practice must therefore charge accordingly to enable it to cover the myriad costs associated with running an average veterinary practice, pay you and also have money to be able to reinvest and develop the practice and the service offered to clients. It is great to see that many of the vet schools are introducing aspects of business studies into their undergraduate curriculum, thus equipping graduates with the knowledge and awareness of practice finance that they will need in their jobs. The other aspect of 'money awareness' which is important to learn in practice is the fact that sometimes, in spite of knowing what tests and treatments would have a good chance of making a difference in a specific case, cost

can be the ultimate deciding factor in clients' decision-making. There is often very little way round this and it is up to you, as a vet, to discuss all of the options, from the cheapest right the way through to the 'Gold Standard,' with any client and allow them to ultimately make an informed decision.

- d) **On-Call & Weekends** – Unless you're very lucky (and we will discuss whether it really is 'lucky') then you will be expected to do your fair share of weekend work and on-call. I have, for example, worked in clinics where I would see normal consults on a Saturday morning every four weeks or so, and then be on-call for a full weekend about every seven weeks. Each vet would also do one night on-call during the week, which was often quiet but could sometimes prove to be very busy indeed! Missed lunches, late finishes and nights with less-than-optimal amounts of sleep are all aspects of being a vet, which it is important to be prepared for if you wish to enter clinical practice. With the development and growth of emergency service providers, such as Vets Now, which cover out-of-hours (OOH) for practices, more and more first opinion jobs are able to offer their vets 'no out-of-hours.' Now, this may sound like a wonderful idea, and, trust me, it is, especially when you get to leave work at the end of the day and know that you don't have to worry about anything until the following day, but there are drawbacks to this 'perk,' especially if you are a new graduate. A lot of the more interesting and challenging cases in practice come to us

rota then you would not get to see such cases, potentially limiting your clinical development and, also, the opportunity to manage cases and make clinical decisions yourself, without the all too reliable and convenient back-up of the senior vet in the next room. It is during these moments that new vets often feel themselves develop the most, as they are forced to 'step up to the mark.' Naturally, if you really did need assistance or advice on something out-of-hours then any good practice would have a system in place to enable you to contact a colleague. My first job was in a clinic that had no OOH and although the lack of sleepless nights was blissful, I became acutely aware upon joining my most recent UK practice of how underdeveloped my skills were in certain areas. Too much on-call, however, can be just as bad as it often leads to rapid burnout and sky-high stress levels. Not good.

- e) **Continued Professional Development (CPD)** – All vets have to satisfy the RCVS that they continue to keep their knowledge and skills current and CPD is the way to ensure this. Vets are expected to complete a minimum of 135 hours of CPD over any three year period, with the PDP serving as new vets' first year of CPD. There are many forms that CPD can take, from attending conferences, such as the BSAVA Congress, company-sponsored meetings and lectures, which are often free, and courses run by commercial CPD providers and the universities. You are also allowed to record a certain number of hours of personal,





David Sajik

BVetMed MRCVS

Junior Clinical Training Scholar

The Queen Mother Animal

I graduated from The Royal Veterinary College in 2009. After graduation, I worked in a busy two-branch small animal practice before embarking on my quest to become a veterinary specialist. I did not always want to be a specialist; when I graduated, I was fully prepared to spend the rest of my career working in small animal general practice with the ambition of setting up my own facility.

Whilst working, I discovered my interest in surgery and from there made the decision to become a specialist. After my first job, I obtained a surgical internship at Fitzpatrick Referrals, a private orthopaedic referral centre, where my drive to become a specialist was confirmed, through working as part of an incredibly dedicated team. After completing my first internship, I moved back to The Royal Veterinary College to complete a rotating internship in the university referral hospital; here I have again had the chance to work as part of a world-leading team, experiencing life in the largest small animal referral hospital in Europe whilst expanding my knowledge and skill base extensively along the way.

Outside of work, I enjoy being outdoors and especially taking part in winter sports, although I have had little opportunity in the last couple of years. Specialising takes a high level of dedication, however

I believe it is vital to maintain work-life balance; it just takes a little more effort.

Specialist Training

1. When did you first decide that you wanted to be a veterinary specialist? What prompted your decision?

The decision to become a veterinary specialist was, for me, more of an evolution than a single, discrete decision or realisation.

Whilst at vet school on extra mural studies (EMS), I was fortunate to see practice in a busy small animal practice with an orthopaedic certificate holder. This practice was where I gained my first exposure to veterinary surgery of any kind, be it the day-to-day surgery common to any small animal veterinary practice in the UK, or the orthopaedic surgery with the certificate holder. I returned to this practice several times during my training, and was very privileged to see practice with a European and American board certified specialist in small animal surgery who had begun using the practice facilities as a base for her referral service. It was at this time that I realised I had an interest in surgery. However, at this point in my training, everything was new and exciting and I could see myself forging a career within almost any area of the veterinary field.

During my final year, I contemplated both applying for internships immediately after graduation and going into small animal or mixed practice. I really had no idea what I wanted to do; I had spent more than 10 years wanting to be a vet but, at this time, did not know what aspect of being a vet I found most appealing. Following graduation, I

was offered a job working with one of the assistant vets from my EMS placement practice, who had left to set up her own practice. Whilst working there, I found that I really enjoyed every aspect of the day-to-day life of general practice; I developed my own group of clients and was pleased to be part of a very friendly and capable team. I found surgery particularly satisfying and was very fortunate to be part of a team that was keen to teach and pass on their skills to a new graduate. I think the realisation that I wanted to become a surgical specialist was borne initially out of frustration – I had spent 5 years learning what was possible but my capability was limiting the service I could offer. In practice, I found that I was being presented with surgical conditions for which I knew what was required for treatment, but was limited by my own ability and facilities available to me in general practice. It was incredibly frustrating to make a diagnosis but then have to refer the animal to someone else to fix. I have always had the drive to do the best I can. From this evolved my desire to become a specialist veterinary surgeon.

2. What has been your career progression to date and what stages do you need to go through in order to qualify as a specialist?

The term specialist is reserved for veterinary surgeons who have obtained a veterinary diploma in their particular field, usually accredited in the UK by the European, American or the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons. Prior to being accepted onto a residency training program, many positions require the completion of a number of years in practice, often to include an RCVS/ECVS recognised internship. The specific training typically requires completion of a 3 or 4 year residency training programme, under the guidance of a boarded specialist, before

sitting examinations; other criteria - including case log, publications and presentations - are also part of the residency training programme.

After graduation from the Royal Veterinary College I spent just under 18 months working in small animal general practice just outside Guildford, Surrey. During the final 6 months I used my half day to see practice at Fitzpatrick Referrals, a nearby orthopaedic referral centre, taking the opportunity to see referral orthopaedic surgery and gain further experience in a hospital environment. Then, when the opportunity arose I secured a 12 month position as an intern. After completing the internship I stayed an additional 2 months completing research studies I had undertaken, before returning to general practice as a locum vet; including some out-of-hours work. During this time I obtained my current position as a Junior Clinical Training Scholar (University internship) at the Royal Veterinary College, with the plan to apply for residency positions next year.

3. What advice and information on options to specialise were available when you were at vet school? Do you think there was sufficient information provided?

During the last two of years of my undergraduate training we had careers days when various aspects of 'life and work after vet school' were discussed, and when vets and people from research and industry were available to discuss options and career plans. Understandably, it was assumed that the majority of people in my year would move into general practice after graduation and, as a result, most of the career guidance was focused on this. There were students who knew already

that they wanted to specialise, research or move into industry straight after graduation and, as far as I know, they were able to find the guidance they required within the university or as a result of help from members of staff with contacts in the relevant field.

4. What is your opinion on the idea of introducing specialisation earlier in the vet course? Should vet undergraduates be given an opportunity to specialise before graduating or should we continue to graduate with skills and knowledge across the board?

This is a difficult question to address and, obviously, I can only comment on my own personal experiences. I believe firmly that any veterinary specialisation should be built upon the foundation of a strong general veterinary knowledge base. If specialisation is to be introduced earlier in the veterinary course, I believe it should be by providing additional teaching but without compromising other very important areas.

During my degree, I was given ample opportunity to explore nearly every area of veterinary science. The final clinical year provided broad exposure to most aspects of veterinary practice; there was time in the university first opinion practice as well as EMS first opinion placements in conjunction with multiple weeks in the university referral hospital environment and weeks dedicated to veterinary research. The majority of students plan to move into general practice after graduation; however, offering additional teaching and tutoring to students keen to pursue specialist careers could be very beneficial to the early careers of these individuals.

5. What is the biggest challenge associated with pursuing specialist training?

Irrespective of the field in which you intend to specialise, competition for residency positions will be fierce. I have colleagues who have applied for every residency opening, year after year, and have not yet been successful; some have given up after years of trying. Some fields are more competitive than others, but obtaining a residency position in any field is a huge achievement and, from what I hear, is getting more highly contested each year.

The residencies themselves are intense; long hours at work, evenings and weekends studying, working on-call, research and publication requirements all mount up so commitment is vital to success. Once the residency has been completed, the final hurdle is the diploma examination – which has been described by a colleague as “the hardest exam you will ever sit”.

6. How long do you expect your training to become a specialist to take?

The specialist training itself usually requires completion of a 3- or 4-year residency placement. Today, achieving a residency placement is the biggest challenge. Realistically, you should anticipate at least 4 to 5 years of post-graduate training before sitting the diploma examination. Having spent 2 years completing internships I am looking at a minimum of 5 years further training, but I could potentially spend the next 5 years (or longer) trying to get a residency position, whilst working in practice as a locum to support myself.

7. What is a typical day for you, if such a day exists?

The typical day of an intern is quite difficult to describe because there is such great variation between internships and also day-to-day within an internship.

In my first internship, interns were primarily assistants to the senior surgeons. This provided fantastic experience both in surgery and also pre- and post-surgery with case investigation, diagnostics and management. Knowledge and skills were obtained 'on the job' through clinical experience of referral cases. The typical day started between 8-9am, depending upon the shift, and extended until all the work was complete, often in the early hours of the following morning.

My current placement is a rotating internship, during which we spend time working with all the major services in the hospital, combined with manning the out-of-hours service, providing exposure to first opinion as well as referral cases. Again, the primary role is as an assistant to the senior clinicians. In the university environment, a key part of our job is working with the students, helping with organisation of procedures, case management and clinical discussions; these are additional facets of the job that I really enjoy.

8. What do you most enjoy about your training?

It is difficult to focus on one thing; I feel very fortunate to have worked in two highly progressive referral centres with many clinicians at the leading edge of their field. The internships have given me the opportunity to see what is possible in veterinary medicine alongside improving my general knowledge and ability through working closely with specialist professionals. Even if I am unsuccessful in my aim of becoming a surgical specialist, the skills and knowledge I will have

gained through the internships should benefit my clinical practice, ultimately making me a better clinician.

9. What do you least enjoy about your training?

The path to specialising takes a high level of dedication; unfortunately, aspects of life outside of work do get pushed back. I have been very lucky to enjoy working in first opinion practice and two referral centres; I have been exposed to multiple aspects of the profession and have taken as much as I can from each experience. The hours are long and the work demanding but I cannot say that I have disliked anything about the past couple of years; they have been tough, but have facilitated greater experience and exposure and hopefully a better level of knowledge, understanding and capability.

10. Many people think that you have to take a pretty big pay-cut when moving from practice into training on either an internship or residency. How true is that assumption?

From my experience, it is true that payment during internships and residencies is significantly less than would be expected by a vet working in general practice. However, payment depends very much on the individual placement and practices often provide additional benefits such as accommodation and extensive CPD opportunities. Many universities pay a tax-free stipend and offer student status, whereas most private practices pay an annual salary. The annual salary appears to vary greatly between placements, so is something that should be looked at by applicants. Ultimately, the main benefit to be achieved

through internships and residency programs is the further development of knowledge and case exposure.

11. What advice would you give to a young vet wanting to specialise during their career?

Becoming a specialist is not an easy task and, therefore, deciding to embark on specialist training is not a decision to be made on a whim or impulse. Interest in a specific subject area is a very good starting point; from there you need to do some research – whats, wheres, whens etc. I found that specialists and vets working in specialist or referral centres were a fantastic source of advice and guidance. My tutor in my final years at university was a very good source of advice for the immediate post-graduation period.

I have been very fortunate to work with a number of specialists during my internships, each offering their own advice. I recommend sourcing as many points of view and opinions as possible, and then use the collective advice to help you make your decisions. The ultimate answer is that there are no real ‘hard and fast’ answers to becoming a specialist – I have friends who have tried for years to obtain a residency position and been unsuccessful, and I have colleagues who have gone straight from university to internship and then residency.

Irrespective of your field of choice, competition for places is strong, either because many people want the subject or because certain subjects have very few places to offer each year – you have to stand out. Maximising your experience is a key factor, either through internships or further training such as CPD, certification, and further education such as BSc, MSc and PhD degrees. Presenting work and studies at veterinary meetings is a strong addition to your experience

and may provide the opportunities to meet people already within the field of interest. Veterinary research and publications are an important part of the residency programme and being able to demonstrate an interest and a capability is a very important skill. The selection panel for residency positions has a very tough job working through a sea of applicants – if they have already met or worked with candidates, they will have a better insight into applications and this should help maximise chances of acceptance. Remember, the selection panel are choosing someone to work with for at least 3 years, it is best if they've met you first and that you have made a good impression. Visiting practices and institutions, attending veterinary meetings and CPD courses are ideal opportunities for this and, in addition, it will improve your CV.

There will always be many good applicants for residency positions; despite all the hard work applicants put in there is no doubt that luck has a part to play in many successful applications – either being in the right place at the right time, being asked the right questions at interview, or simply being given that little nugget of advice that edges you ahead of other applicants. I work on the principle that the harder you work the luckier you get. Play fair and no one can ask any more of you.

There is little more for me to say really – good luck and I look forward to potentially working with you in the future.

12. Any additional information that you would like to add.

At this time I have not looked outside the UK for residency positions. However, should I not succeed in obtaining a place in the UK, I would look to apply for programmes in America to maximise my chances.

Applications for internship and residency positions in North America work very differently to the UK. It is not unlike the UCAS university application process, in that all applications are processed centrally once a year. Most of the positions are applied for and awarded through the 'Veterinary Internship and Residency Matching Program' or the 'Match'. All information is available from www.virmp.org.

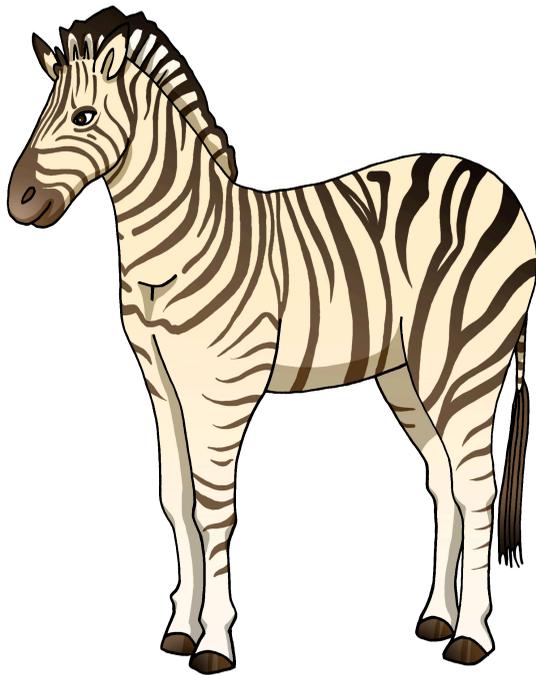
Institutions and private practices upload the details of available positions, with application requirements and program contents between September and October. From mid-October applicants are able to review programs and decide upon their rankings, with the application deadline in early December. The results of the Match are usually posted in February.

The prospective intern or resident selects the program or programs they wish to apply for and 'ranks' them in order of preference. Standard application packs are completed and submitted via the website. The institutions then perform a similar process selecting the candidates they are willing to accept and rank them in order of preference; both ranking orders are blinded to the other party. A central computer is then used to match the prospective applicants with the institutions, based upon their mutual ranking. Cost of application is tiered depending upon the number of programs you wish to rank, with increasing cost for increasing applications.

Again, the same recommendations for maximising your chances apply regarding visiting institutions and meeting potential future colleagues. Obviously, it takes more effort to visit universities and private practices in America but this shows a high level of commitment and hopefully improves their opinion of your application.

It is important to remember that some programs require the completion of the North American Veterinary Licensing Examination (NAVLE), and it would be advisable to contact the institution/practice in advance of application to ensure you meet the required criteria. There may also be immigration/visa requirements so checking with the US or Canadian Consul/Embassy would be advisable.

Since writing this, David has been successful in his application for a residency, and is due to stay on at the Royal Veterinary College, London, for a further three years to complete his residency training.



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Chris is a vet, author and a bit of a self-confessed technology Nerd. He has been writing and advising on all aspects of vet careers and vet school since a vet student himself and is proud of the difference made to numerous students, parents and schools.

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